

Dreamer Beware: The Insightful Dreams of Sarah, Dan and Katherine

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As I have noted in the initial essay in this series on dream interpretation (Bergquist, 2022), a dream can serve many functions—sometimes several functions at the same time. It might fulfill a forbidden desire, help to resolve a longstanding conflict in our life or just provide us with some late-night entertainment. One of the potentially most important (adaptive) but quite controversial function of a dream is to alert the dreamer to some issue that they might not want to confront during their waking life.

Just as anxiety can signal that there is something threatening inside us, so a dream might provide a signal that some issue outside of us can be challenging. This issue might concern a specific interpersonal relationship, or some puzzling problem related to their work life. The range of issues that dreams might address is quite wide—and impressive. We are trying to ignore this threatening issue or are diminishing its importance; however, our dream tells us in dramatic fashion that this issue must be addressed.

Three Dreams

In this essay, I wish to address this function of issue-identification by reporting on three dreams that I have collected from colleagues over the past several months. After providing the content of each dream and a bit of the background regarding the dreamer at the time they had their dream, I turn to the interpretation of dreams offered by Erich Fromm, and noted psychoanalyst who broke off from the traditional psychoanalytic school to offer insights regarding not only the human psyche but also the societies and cultures in which people live. In *The Forgotten Language* (Fromm, 1951), Fromm offers several important proposals (and potential insights) regarding how dreams can assist us in identifying and addressing the challenge of difficult issues that we are facing while falling asleep. But first the three dreams.

Sarah

Sarah is a 46 year old executive working in the insurance industry. She considers herself to be “emotionally intelligent” (to use a term now in corporate favor) and to be a good team player. Yet, as she is getting ready for bed, something is disturbing her about her work life. She doesn’t know what has “gone wrong” – only that she has not been looking forward to going to work during the past couple of months.

Sarah reported the following dream:

I was meeting with one of my colleagues from work. He had a razor in his hand and, as we talked, he began cutting my face. It didn’t bleed and I felt nothing. He was very gracious in talking with me about work-related matters; however, after we finished our meeting, I returned to my home and looked in the mirror. I saw that my face was covered with these cuts. I screamed and suddenly woke up.

Sarah began reflecting in her darkened bedroom about her relationship with this co-worker. She realized that he was subtly “cutting her” with words that diminished the value of her work and pointed out her

flaws. Sarah noted that she often left her meetings with him feeling very bad about herself. She had assumed that this was just her own vulnerable self-image.

After this dream, Sarah wondered if it was his subtle “cutting” that was creating these feelings of diminished self-worth. Perhaps this is why she doesn’t look forward to going to work. In reporting this dream to me, Sarah indicates that she is now considering ways in which she can provide her colleague with feedback about his “wounding” behavior. Sarah wonders if he is even aware of what he is doing—and does he have a similar impact on other people at work (particularly women). Is this a case of what some psychologists are called “micro-aggression.”

Dan

Dan is a 55 year old owner of a book store. He wakes up early in his sleep cycle having had a very disturbing dream:

I was transported somehow by my wife, Betty, to a location that was very different from where I now live. I was surrounded by men who were ridiculing me and forcing me to do hard labor for which I was not prepared. I spent time gathering up scrap metal and throwing it into a very old truck. My hands were getting cut on the metal. I asked several of the men for some gloves so that my hands would be protected. They laughed at me and told me to toughen up my hands and continue working. I was soon driving the old truck. It barely ran and I asked someone about getting it repaired. They said I should do the repair and I said I didn’t know how. All of the men laughed at me, and I was pushed to the ground.

I soon became quite tired and tried to get some sleep by lying on the ground. Several men started kicking me. My wife, Betty, showed up and she began flirting with several of the men. I heard the men say that Betty was looking for a new man in her life and was going to “try out” several of those who were kicking me. I began to cry--then they all started laughing at me and kicking me again. My wife gathered up the car keys to our car and told me she was going to drive back to our home. I asked her if I could go with her. Betty looked at me with disdain and told me that I would have to get one of the men to drive me home. I woke up.

Dan suddenly was quite frightened of his wife. He recalled that Betty’s mother (Gertrude) had sent her husband (Ben) (who was mildly impaired cognitively) to live with one of their children. Ben was shuttled around the children for about six months and then sent to a facility where he lived for another ten years. Ben never returned to his home.

Dan also reflected back on an interaction he had with Betty before going to bed. He had expressed some concern about a physical problem he was experiencing—yet Betty seemed indifferent to his concern. She was focusing on her demanding schedule for the upcoming day. Dan felt hurt by her seeming indifference and went to sleep with a nagging feeling about his relationships with Betty.

Katherine

As I noted in my first essay regarding the interpretation of dreams (Bergquist, 2023a), I had the opportunity to collect dreams in a dream laboratory many years ago from Katherine, a remarkable young woman who was able to recall all of her dreams when woken up in the laboratory and asked by a researcher speaking on an intercom from another room: “what is on your mind.” Typically, the person serving as a “subject” in the lab reports at least a fragment of some dream they were having when

woken up. We “knew” that they were dreaming because of information we were obtaining from eye movements and brain activity. This information was obtained from small electrodes we placed above and below their eyes and from other electrodes glued onto several places on their head.

While the procedures used in preparing someone for sleep were never ideal (and often themselves played a role in the subject’s dreams), there were a remarkable set of dreams collected from many subjects (reported in Breger, Hunter and Lane, 1971)—especially those collected from Katherine. I have already written about and provided a rather detailed analysis of a dream (“The Pelican”) that was profoundly disturbing for Katherine—a full-fledged “nightmare.” She had another dream that was equally as intriguing—and rarely obtained in a dream laboratory. It was one of those “prophetic” dreams that are often reported, but rarely accepted as valid by those who are skeptical of “wacko” accounts which suggest some sort of mystical powers.

As background, it should be noted that Katherine was an artist who was working on a glass mobile at the time of her participation in the dream study. She had also been dating a specific man for about two months. Here is the dream as reported by Katherine:

Researcher: Katherine, what is going through your mind?

Katherine: oh, ah, I was having a dream. Wait, what was it about . . . it was about my glass mobile. The one I have been working on for the last couple of weeks. It is a very pretty mobile. In the dream, my boyfriend, Steve, had just come over to my apartment. I had just added another glass object to the mobile . . . Steve wanted to hold it. You know, the mobile. And I didn’t want him to hold it. But, he insisted on holding it. I was getting mad. He grabbed it and the mobile broke into many pieces [Katherine has strong emotions in her voice.]. There were pieces of glass all over the floor. I began to cry. I shouted at Steve. He got up and left my apartment. It was then that you woke me up.

Researcher: Can you remember anything else?

Katherine: No. It was a horrible dream. I was so angry at Steve. And I just looked at all of the glass on the floor. I don’t remember anything else.

Researcher: OK. We’ll let you go back to sleep.

This dream was disturbing in and of itself. Especially since Katherine had a horrible nightmare just one night earlier. While many of her dreams were quite pleasant and even fanciful, this dream of the shattered mobile was obviously quite stressful for Katherine. As in the case of the Pelican dream, Katherine had no memory of the Shattered Mobile when she woke in the morning.

Then it actually happened. Her boyfriend came over to her apartment that afternoon. Picked up the mobile and “accidentally” dropped it. The mobile shattered into many pieces—as in the dream. That evening, when Katherine came to the laboratory, she was asked (as was always the case) if there had been any important events occurring during the day (the study being in part about the presence of “day residue” in the subject’s dreams). Katherine reported to the researcher that the mobile had been dropped by Steve and she was still very angry and wasn’t sure if she would rebuild the mobile – or remain involved with Steve (she soon broke off the relationship with Steve).

The researcher broke the established protocol by revealing to Katherine the content of the Shattered Mobile dream she had the previous night. Katherine reiterated that she did not recall this dream. However, both Katherine and the researcher acknowledged that somehow the dream might have remained at some level in Katherine's sub-conscious and might have somehow influenced Steve's actions regarding the mobile.

Katherine revealed that she had several other dreams in recent years that were "prophetic." As a "scientist" (she was majoring in biology and psychology), Katherine found it very hard to believe that these dreams were actually predicting what would occur in the near future and she had never revealed to anyone that she had these predictive dreams. Both the researcher and Katherine paused to reflect on what all of this might mean. They didn't talk more about this matter, though Katherine came to the lab for two more nights of sleep and reported another 7 dreams. The researcher reported several months later that she was still pondering what this Shattered Mobile dream reveals about the potential function of dreams.

Types of Dream Insight

There are many perspectives that can be taken on dreams and both the function they serve (see Bergquist, 2022) and the meaning that can be assigned to them. While one does not have to agree with the meaning(s) assigned to dreams by Sigmund Freud (1900/2010), one can agree with him that dreams might have multiple meanings—much as in the case of many human creations (myths, legends, poetry, art, music).

Like many other interpreters of dreams, Freud found them to be very economical in making use a few images to convey multiple meanings. We saw evidence of this in the dream reported in one of our earlier essays when the term "bridge" seemed to be used in three ways within a single dream: (1) the game of Bridge, (2) bridge of the nose, and (3) a structural bridge. Given the potential multi-layers feature of dreams, we face the challenge of finding a specific perspective to take in approaching dreams such as the three presented in this essay. I offer two perspectives and then show how they might be applied to our three dreams. The first of these perspectives concerns the nature of the narrative contained in the dream.

Poetic or Dramatic

A dream can convey multiple meanings through the use of a poetic form--a metaphor. We see this in the face cutting portrayed in Sarah's dream. While her colleague would never actually cut Sarah, the use of a razor to cut Sarah potentially conveys several different meanings. First, the razor can cause Sarah to feel wounded. Second, the razor might cut without Sarah actually knowing that she has been cut. Third, the razor is small. It could be wielded without Sarah actually knowing that it is being used to wound her.

There are additional ways in which to engage the multi-meanings of the razor cut. For instances, razors are often associated with male grooming. Could this dream have something to do with male aggression. Razors are also an "old" form of grooming (often replaced with an electric razor). Is this form of male aggression a regression back to old male/female modes of relating? When a metaphor is used within a dream, then this dream holds the potential of offering multiple insights. As Freud would note, the dream is economic—much as a poem can be short but rich with meaning.

There is second way in which dreams generate multiple meaning. The dream can convey a dramatic enactment--as in Dan being beaten down and humiliated. One or more meanings can be assigned to each episode in the dream—making it that much richer as a source of multiple insights. Dan’s wife (Betty) could be considered a source of betrayal in many ways. She transported Dan to this unfamiliar and potentially hostile location. She offered little support for Dan when she found him being mistreated. Betty even started flirting with some of the men who were humiliating her husband.

As in the case of Sarah’s dream, we don’t have to take Betty’s negative actions literally. However, we might find that Dan is concerned about his wife’s potential failure to support him when he faces difficult challenges. Dan might also (or instead) be concerned about his own failing “virility” and about his wife’s declining interest in their sexual life. Perhaps most importantly, Dan could be deeply concerned about ways his wife could bring him to a place he doesn’t prefer when he grows older or is infirmed. Any well-crafted story can convey many life-lessons. We need only reflect on what we learned from that lengthy novel we read several years ago. Insights from this favorite “work of art” still pops up when we are faced with some life challenges.

There also are dreams that convey both poetic imagery and compelling narrative. We certainly find this to be the case with Katherine’s dream. There is the poetry associated with the glass mobile that Katherine is building, as well as the drama associated with the dropping and shattering of the mobile by her boyfriend. The mobile is fragile, beautiful, and ethereal (floating in space). It is made of glass—therefore being transparent. Furthermore, the mobile is something about which Katherine cares deeply. She has obviously directed considerable time and talent into crafting this work of art. Do the characteristics of the mobile convey something about Katherine’s image of herself as being fragile, beautiful and ethereal? Is she transparent like the glass objects floating in space?

Then we bring in the dramatic act. The mobile is dropped--and it shatters. Is Katherine, herself, about to be dropped? Does her transparency leave her vulnerable to careless behavior on the part of people about whom she cares. Given her fragile state, will she shatter if dropped? Conversely, does she remain “ethereal” as a way to protect herself from being hurt and shattered? Yet, if she is suspended in space, isn’t she more vulnerable to being dropped and shattered? Does she care about her mobile more than important people in her life? Is this part of her defensive posture—a way to avoid being dropped and shattered? Yet, if she is indifferent to people in her life then isn’t she more likely to get dropped? Poetry and drama are quite powerful when interwoven in a dream (or any other expressive mode).

Thoughtless or Thoughtful

There is a second important way in which to approach a dream and its meaning. Like Sigmund Freud and most of his followers, we can conceive of dreams as primarily being a vehicle for the “thoughtless” presentation and often fanciful fulfillment of some primitive wish. This being a case, then we are advised to not act on any outcomes of the dream when we wake up. The dream should never “unleash” the beast that resides in each of us. Freud’s “beast” (that he called the “Id”) is to be contained by our realistic functions (Freud’s “Ego”) or—as a fallback position—by the irrational forces of shame, guilt and remorse (embedded in Freud’s “Superego”) that encounter our beast and tie it to a stack.

Alternatively, we can conceive of dreams as being at times quite “thoughtful” – and filled with insights that can be of great value in guiding our waking behavior. Much as in the case of myths, rituals, art and music, dreams can teach us, warn us and even “save us” from the beast (rather than being a venue for

the unleashing of the beast). A blended perspective is offered by Erich Fromm, a neo-psychoanalytic practitioner and author, in *The Forgotten Language*. Fromm (1951, pp. 146-147) suggests that:

. . . dreams are either manifestations of our animal nature--the gate of delusion--or of our most rational powers--the gate of truth . . . Some [students of dreams] believe, like Freud, that all dreams are of an irrational nature; others, like Jung, that they are all revelations of higher wisdom. But many students share the view expressed throughout this book--that dreams partake of both, of our irrational and of our rational nature, and that it is the aim of the art of dream interpretation to understand when our better self and when our animal nature makes itself heard in the dream.

While Fromm believes that dreams can be both thoughtless and thoughtful, he tends to lean in his analysis on the thoughtful side (probably as a way to balance off the predominant emphasis among psychoanalytic thinkers on the irrational, thoughtless side). Fromm (1951, pp. 31-32) offers the following insightful distinction between the “reality” of our waking life and the “reality” of our life in dreams. He first considers the “benefits” of relying on our waking reality:

. . . while we are asleep we are not occupied with managing outer reality. We do not perceive it and we do not influence it, nor are we subject to the influences of the outside world on us. From this it follows that the effect of this separation from reality depends on the quality of reality itself. If the influence from the outside world is essentially beneficial, the absence of this influence during sleep would tend to lower the value of our dream activity, so that it would be inferior to our mental activities during the daytime when we are exposed to the beneficial influence of outside reality.

Fromm (1951, p. 32-33) goes further in building the case for this assumption:

Is . . . the man-made reality outside ourselves not the most significant factor for the development of the very best in us, and must we not expect that, when deprived of contact with the outside world, we regress temporarily to a primitive, animal-like, unreasonable state of mind? Much can be said in favor of such an assumption, and the view that such a regression is the essential feature of the state of sleep, and thus of dream activity, has been held by many students of dreaming from Plato to Freud. From this viewpoint dreams are expected to be expressions of the irrational, primitive strivings in us, and the fact that we forget our dreams so easily is amply explained by our being ashamed of those irrational and criminal impulses which we express when we were not under the control of society.

Fromm notes that this traditional interpretation of dreams as irrational, primitive strivings is “undoubtedly true.” Yet, according to Fromm (1951, p. 33) there may be benefits associated with the “reality” found in our dreams. He offers the following provocative perspective on reality and dreams:

. . . the question is whether [this traditional interpretation] is exclusively true or whether the negative elements in the influence of society do not account for the paradoxical fact that we are not only less reasonable and less decent in our dreams but that we are also more intelligent, wiser, and capable of better judgment when we are asleep than when we are awake.

This challenging perspective would seem to be aligned with the dynamic factors operating in the three dreams presented at the start of this essay. In all three dreams we find that insights are available to the

dreamer. These insights, in turn, influenced the behavior of both Sarah and Dan during the days following recall of their dream. Sarah reflected on the “cutting” that occurred when interacting with her co-worker, while Dan had some nagging feelings about his wife.

The question becomes: did either Sarah or Dan take any action based on these dream-based insights? This would seem to be the key question to ask when considering the value of Fromm’s proposal: if a dream does offer an insightful perspective on reality, then does the dreamer do anything about these insights and do the actions taken yield a positive benefit for the dreamer? Does Sarah somehow confront her co-worker – or perhaps spend less time with him? Does Dan find a way to talk with Betty about the dream and even share some of his concerns about being shuttle about when infirmed or old?

In the case of Katherine, we don’t know if the content of her dream actually influenced events occurring during the following day (dropping of the mobile by her boyfriend). We are left with an important question: can dream content be influential (and beneficial) even if the dreamers don’t recall the dream? Does the dream somehow “linger” back in the recesses of the dreamer’s mind? Could it possibly operate as part of the peremptory ideational stream that I have described in previous essays? (Bergquist, 2023a; Bergquist, 2023b).

Beyond the Interpersonal Relationship

Fromm (1951, p. 45) would have us look beyond the cases of Sarah, Dan and Katherine. He believes that dreams can serve many important functions other than just providing insights about other people with whom we are relating:

Not only do insight into our relation to others or theirs to us, value judgments and predictions occur in our dreams, but also intellectual operations superior to those in the waking state. This is not surprising, since penetrating thinking requires an amount of concentration which we are often deprived of in the waking state, while the state of sleep is conducive to it.

We find many examples of dreams being the source of creativity—especially as noted by Deirdre Barrett (2001) in her proposition that dreams serve as *The Committee of Sleep*. This phrase regarding the dream as a committee was first offered by the novelist, John Steinbeck, who declared that “it is a common experience that a problem difficult at night is resolved in the morning after the committee of sleep has worked on it.” (Barrett,2001, dust cover).

Barrett reflects on the long history of dreams being deemed beneficial as sources of insight about the world. She identifies a wide range of instances when dreams produced master works of art, major scientific breakthroughs (including the works of two Nobel Prize winners), and the more mundane solutions to everyday problems. The following summary is offered (Barrett, 2001, p. 184):

For centuries, creativity was seen as beyond man, a gift from the gods. If dreams played a role, they were considered divine messages. In the nineteenth century, Goethe and Schiller connected creation with the unconscious. Though still mysterious; the process was now viewed as internally arising rather than externally imposed. Freud's emphasis on dreaming as "the royal road to the unconscious" brought it into this same realm.

Twentieth-century psychologists divide problem solving into four stages: “preparation,” “frustration,” “inspiration,” and “verification.” Inspiration cannot be accessed at will, and creativity is most essential here. This is where dreams typically play their role. Any break from

concentrated problem solving may allow a misleading assumption to dissipate. But the sleeping mind abandons conventional logic most completely to pursue novel approaches.

How does the Committee do this? Neurology suggests that dreaming is simply the mind thinking in a different biochemical mode. Throughout this emotional, visual, hallucinatory state, we continue to worry about personal, practical, or artistic problems and occasionally we solve them. Freud wrote of a "dream censor" keeping unacceptable sex and aggression at bay. But as a gatekeeper for novel solutions to problems, the Committee is more liberal than any daytime censor.

Barrett (2001, p. 189) concludes her analysis of dream functioning by proposing—like Fromm—that we pay attention to the representation of problems in our dreams—for “above all [dreaming is] a time when the unheard parts of ourselves are allowed to speak—we would do well to listen.”

Dreams and Cultures

Erich Fromm goes further in making the case for dreams being beneficial. Like Deirdre Barrett, Fromm offers a brief history of dreams in human societies. Follows in the tradition of Carl Jung, Fromm also offers brief history of many other human enterprise that offer comparable benefits. Many insightful and beneficial products are to be found in all culture (Fromm, 1951, p. 32):

. . . the evidence that cultural influences are beneficial to us seems almost overwhelming. What differentiates us from the world of animals is our capacity to create culture. What differentiates the higher from the lower stages of human development is the variation in cultural level. The most elementary element of culture, language, is the precondition for any human achievement. Man has been rightly called a symbol-making animal, for without our capacity to speak, we could hardly be called human. But every other human function also depends on our contact with the outside world. We learn to think by observing others and by being taught by them. We develop our emotional, intellectual and artistic capacities under the influence of contact with the accumulation of knowledge and artistic achievement that created society. We learn to love and to care for others by contact with them, and we learn to curb impulses of hostility and egoism by love for others, or at least by fear of them.

According to Fromm, these same benefits accrue from our production of dreams. We can similarly be guided by insights found in our dreams. Much as in the case of Sarah, Dan and Katherine, we “would do well” (as Deirdre Barrett notes) to listen to our dreams, discern what is valid, and act upon the insights conveyed in the dream.

Representation of a Problem in the Dream

If dreams do provide insights, then how do we discern what is valid and what is “noise” (random images) or even sources of distraction (Freud’s defensive mechanisms in action)? Fromm offer several ways in which to engage this discerning process.

Magnitude

First of all is the matter of exaggeration in dreams. The poetic and dramatic elements in dreams are not buffered by reality. They often (if not always) offer an extreme version of what the problem is and what

it can do. Put in other terms, dreams often offer the “worst case scenarios” (or sometimes a best-case scenario). Fromm, 1951, p. 167) frames this dynamic feature of dreams as one of exaggerated quantity:

Dreams are like a microscope through which we look at the hidden occurrences in our soul. A comparatively small trend in the complex texture of desires and fears may be shown in the dream as having the same magnitude as another one which is of much greater weight in the dreamer's psychic system. A comparatively small annoyance with another person, for instance; may give rise to a dream in which the other person falls sick and thus is capable of annoying us, and yet this would not mean that we have such a strong anger against that person that we "really" want him to be sick. Dreams give us a clue to the qualities of hidden desires and fears but not to their quantities.

Sarah's dream might illustrate this point. Her colleague isn't literally cutting her. It is metaphoric. Furthermore, the damage being done might not be as great as portrayed in Sarah's dream. As Fromm suggests, it is not a matter of quantity. It is a matter of “making a point” by offering a dramatic staging of the issue being addressed. Thus, in discerning what is valid and useful in a dream, one should not judge the magnitude of the dream's presentation but instead look to the underlying message that is being conveyed in a dramatic fashion—much like one does when considering the primary message being conveyed in an “over-the-top” Wagnerian opera or highly sentimental love song.

Repetition

A second element in the discernment process concerns redundancy. Dreams have a way of being persistent. An important issue or theme is being conveyed in several different ways in a single dream or is being conveyed repeatedly in several dreams. French and Fromm (1964) considered this redundancy to be a sign that a focal, unresolved conflict is being represented repeatedly in our dreams. Does it take repeated messaging sometimes to get our attention. In one of my previous essays, I suggested that focal conflict was to be found in Katherine's Pelican dream (Bergquist, 2023a). Fromm (1951, p. 192) similarly notes that there are recurrent dreams:

. . . which some people report as going on for a period of years, sometimes as far back as they can recall. These dreams usually are expressive of the main theme, of the leitmotif, in a person's life, often the key to the understanding of his neurosis or of the most important aspect of his personality. Sometimes the dream remains unchanged, sometimes there are more or less subtle changes, what are indicate of the inner progress of the dreamer—or of a deterioration, as the case may be.

Even if the issue is not related to some fundamental conflict in our life, it can be important enough that our committee of sleep keeps putting it on the dream agenda.

As we turn back to our three dreamers, we find that we can't really consider repetition in the dreams of Sarah or Dan since we have access to only one dream from each of them. However, Katherine is a different matter. We have 15 dreams collected from three nights in the dream lab. This is a short period of time for any examination of recurrent dreams (or dream themes). Nevertheless, we do find some repetition in the themes of dreams collected over this three-day period. Within these fifteen dreams we find three direct or tangible references to artwork (such as the construction of a glass mobile). We find much more frequent reference to the game of Bridge—which occupies several hours each day in the life of Katherine.

When we look at the Bridge theme, we find a theme of depersonalization, vulnerability and despair. First, playing cards turn into people without facial features or names in several of Katherine's dreams. Second, the playing cards in one of her dreams begin to dance around and mock Katherine. She is quite disturbed within her dream and keeps asking the cards to "Stop it! Stop it!" Third, as we saw in the Pelican dream, Katherine facing the prospect of playing a game of Bridge with will inevitably lead to failure (*"It was like I have to take all the tricks but have no trump. There is no hope. . ."*) She has to win the game but has no resources to do so.

Could this theme relate in some way to the dream in which Katherine's mobile is dropped by her boyfriend? The connection could reside in the threat and seeming betrayal associated with two activities about which Katherine appears to care deeply—this being her artwork and her Bridge playing. Katherine is confronted in the midst of these "precious" activities with being laughed at, forced to win, and left with nothing but a shattered self. People who are close to her either are depersonalized in a game of bridge or damage her by destroying something about which she cares. From Katherine's dream-based perspective, there is no hope. People will continue to mock and betray her. She has to continue "playing out her hand" of interpersonal relationships – but can't really trust or even fully appreciate these relationships.

This powerful theme might be addressed by Katherine if she were to sit down with a thoughtful and compassionate therapist. She is facing an interpersonal challenge that is not uncommon for young adults who are searching for a way in which to establish caring and intimate relationships. Erik Erikson (1980) would suggest that this is the major development task of early adulthood. Katherine's sleep committee might be assisting her in addressing this fundamental developmental issue and is doing so by not only repeatedly bringing up this issue through the use of a telling metaphor (the game of cards), but also by introducing an episode that is both poetic and dramatic (dropping of the glass mobile).

The key question becomes: is the committee's work somehow evident in the waking life of Katherine? How does she react to her boyfriend's dropping of the mobile? Does his "betrayal" (or at least cavalier attitude about her artwork) trigger a deeper concern about all interpersonal relationships (as this deeper concern might be represented in the Bridge as well a Mobile dreams)?

Purpose

A sleep committee is always looking after the best interests of the dreamer. At times, the committee believes that the dreamer is not ready to "face the truth" – thus uses the dream to divert attention from the problem – much as Freud uses anxiety to signal the need for engaging a defensive structure. At other times, the committee believes that the dreamer is ready to face the truth. Sometimes, the committee finds it hard to get the dreamer's attention—so it repeats the message (redundancy) or heightens the poetry or drama (magnitude).

In the case of Sarah, the purpose might relate to her "victimhood." One of the major conceptions concerning the etiology of trauma relates to this condition of being powerless—becoming a traumatized victim—in the face of some powerful force (Levine and Frederick, 2009). Martin Seligman (1992) is noted for his own description and analysis of this condition of helplessness and hopelessness.

In Sarah's case, she appears to be the victim of her colleague's cutting attacks. Sarah is helpless because she doesn't acknowledge that the cutting has occurred. Like many traumatized victims, she considers herself to be the source of her wounding rather than looking for some external perpetrator. Her dream

committee might have noted this self-blame and set up the drama of Sarah's dream to identify the actual perpetrator forcefully and dramatically. The committee seems to have been successful in gaining Sarah's attention and getting her to look outside herself for the reason she holds a negative self-image after meeting with her male colleague.

We find that Dan's committee has identified a quite challenging issue. While Sarah can probably avoid her male colleague and has little invested in her relationship with this abusive colleague at work, Dan is experiencing the abuse of a "loved" one with whom he is planning to spend his entire adult life. Even more than Sarah, Dan's abuse is traumatizing because of the important role played by Betty in his personal life. Many victims of trauma find that they are being victimized by someone who plays a central role to their life (parent, sibling, spouse). I suspect this is not the first time that Dan's committee has brought up this matter of Betty's potential abuse—for it is always very difficult to consider that love and hate can be toxically intermixed in the relationship one has with a loved one.

Our third dream comes from the committee spending a night in the dream lab. Many of the dreams retrieved from those participating in the laboratory experiment concern the dream lab itself—at least during the first night or two. It would be quite understandable that the committee was concerned with sleeping and dreaming in this strange setting with electrodes stuck to the head and face.

And what about this disturbing experience of being woken up several times during the night and being asked to report on something (a dream) that was meant to remain "confidential"? It is interesting to note that many participants in a dream lab find it hard to recall their dreams when woken up after several nights in the lab. In some cases, lab participants actually stop spending time in a REM state during the night. In these instances, the laboratory sessions actually have to be called off so that the participant can get a good night of sleep.

Coming during the third night that Katherine spent in the lab, the glass mobile dream was probably not related to her experience in the laboratory—though her sense of vulnerability could have been heightened by her sharing of personal information (dreams) with other people (those working in the lab). Whether precipitated by the lab or not, the theme of vulnerability might have been introduced by the committee because it was a dominant issue in Katherine's life at this moment in time.

In pondering her relationship with this boyfriend, Katherine might have been working at multiple levels (both conscious and unconscious) on the matter of trust with this new person in her life. Should she open up to him or "play her cards close to the chest"? Should she seek a long-term, intimate relationship with this man or keep him at a distance (make him into just another playing card)?

In Katherine's case, an additional dynamic was soon operating in her life. The event that took place in her dream (dropping of the mobile) actually was replicated in her waking life. The sleep committee warned her—yet Katherine still allowed her boyfriend to not only come to her home but also pick up her mobile. While Katherine might have some unconscious "inking" that something might go wrong where her boyfriend picked up the mobile, this concern was probably outweighed by her boyfriend's apparent interest in her artwork. What happened to Katherine when her unconscious fears were realized?

A host of questions comes to mind. Does she wonder if the mobile was purposefully dropped? Could she ever forgive her boyfriend? Is she over-reacting when the mobile lies shattered at her feet? Does she ask her boyfriend to leave? Does she break off her relationship with him over this one "small" event? How does her committee deal with this event and these questions when Katherine falls asleep in coming

nights? We don't know because Katherine is no longer coming to laboratory. What we do know from a brief follow up interview is that this man is no longer in Katherine's life and that she remains unattached and a compulsive Bridge player.

Implications

As a practicing psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm uses dream interpretation as one of several different strategies to "heal" his patients—he is not alone in taking this approach. It began with Sigmund Freud's extensive use of dreams in his own psychoanalytic practice (Freud, 1900/2010). However, Fromm is suggesting that a dream can itself be of great assistance in this regard. The dream itself provide insights and guidance for action during waking hours. With the assistance of an analyst's interpretation, the dream can help to produce real changes in the life of the dreamer.

This guidance serves as the fourth factor to consider in seeking to interpret the meaning of a dream—if it is truly purposeful as Erich Fromm suggests. We should trace out the implications of what is being portrayed in the dream. What actions should be taken if the dreamer were to move forward in their waking life upon the insights offered in the dream. Should Sarah avoid interacting with her "cutting" colleague? If the dream represented a residual from the previous day's unsatisfactory interaction (as in the case of Dan), then how does the dreamer avoid yet another unsatisfactory interaction tomorrow or the day after tomorrow?

Has a series of dreams all pointed to some fundamental (focal) conflict in the dreamer's life? If so, then what should the dreamer do to address this important, lingering conflict? Psychotherapy? Pastoral counselling? Lifestyle changes? New relationships? New job? New choices? If Fromm is correct, dreams stir things up and provides a reason for taking action. They convey implications through poetic imagery and/or compelling drama. It is the responsibility of the committee of sleep to ensure that these implications are not lost or ignored. . . That is if there really is a committee of sleep.

Is There Really a Committee of Sleep?

I have been following Deirdre Barrett's vision of a sleep committee and have suggested that this committee makes important, strategic decisions regarding the nature and purpose of dreams. Is this notion of a committee nothing more than a metaphor. It is certainly a compelling metaphor that has helped Deirdre Barrett sell quite a few copies of her book; however, can we really say that a committee of some sort exists in our psyche?

We now know that there is no executive function operating in our brain that controls and coordinates all of the diverse functions of the brain. In many ways, according to Karl Pribram, the noted neuroscientist, the brain operates like a dynamic holograph (Hampton-Turner, 1981. pp. 94-97). Rather, like many complex systems, the human brain operates without hierarchical control by one unit of the system (Waldrop,1992). Why then should we consider a committee that provides some executive function when we are asleep?

Committee: To Be or Not to Be

I offer three answers regarding the matter of a sleep committee. First, even if this is just a metaphor, the notion of a committee is critical to appreciating the purposeful role that dreams can play in helping us navigate our complex lives. Even if there is no actual committee, we can engage our dreams with the

assumption that they were meant somehow to guide us in our life. So, let's pretend that the committee exists—just as we pretend that the content of our dreams is insightful and meant to be of benefit to us.

I offer a second answer. The committee does exist as one of the self-organizing elements of the complex neurological system that we call our “brain.” As Ilya Prigogine (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984), a Nobel prize winning scientist, has proposed, system do not need to be organized by some outside entity. They will self-organize. We might find an example of this self-organization in the structuring of a dream during the night. Perhaps the peremptory ideational trains that I focused on in one of my previous essays (Bergquist, 2023a; Bergquist, 2023b) provides something of the original impetus for and even preliminary structure of the committee.

We have a lingering concern about some issue that draws in related concerns, past experiences and hope for the future. They bind together and create the opportunity for formulation of a poetic image or dramatic enactment (much as we do when awake). At some point, this image or enactment precipitates the firing of neurons in our visual cortex (and sometimes our auditory cortex). Certain functions are shut down (such as our arms and lengths) so that we don't somehow enact our dream (the exception being those who walk in their sleep). Other functions are left open—such as eye movements and certain muscles in our neck). We are now ready for the dream. It takes place.

Lucid Dreams

A third answer is available. There is a particular kind of dream that speaks to the capacity of us as dreamers to organize our dreams. This dream is called “lucid” and refers to our capacity to realize that we are dreaming when we are in the midst of a dream. According to Barrett (2001, p. 11):

Lucid dreams are those in which the dreamer realizes he or she is dreaming during the course of the dream. Consciousness allows the dreamer to take volitional action. Lucid dreamers may recall plans for what to do in their dreams. They carry these out even as unexpected aspects of the dream state continue to flow.

This capacity to know we are dreaming and to use this knowledge to influence the direction and content of the dream parallels a capacity we have when awake to think about our thinking and to reflect on the ways in which we experience our life. This capacity is often called “meta-cognition” and a form of higher order thinking. The presence of lucid dreaming suggests that we have the capacity for second order reflection even when we are asleep. As lucid dreamers we can provide our dream with some guidance and can focus on discerning the intentions of our dreams.

Is there some manifestation of a committee of sleep operating in our lucid dreams? If we have the capacity to recognize that we are dreaming when we are in the midst of a dream, then do we somehow have the capacity to create a mechanism for oversight over our dreams? Can we dream about dreaming? If we can create hypothetical situations and plan for the future when we are awake, then perhaps we can not only reflect on our dreams when we are dreaming (lucid dreaming), but also do some planning regarding the content and purpose of the dream when we are asleep. Can we dream about planning to dream? If we can construct meaning when encountering a seemingly random cluster of events when awake, then we might be able to find meaning in the seemingly random events that cascade through our dreams. Perhaps we can mold meaning out of the images appearing in a dream just as we can mold a bowl or statue of a mythic figure out of clay when we are awake. In short, we might

find that there is a committee of sleep that is somehow operating via self-organization when we are asleep.

Regression in the Service of the Ego

The presentation by Erich Fromm of dreams as a problem-identification and, sometimes, a problem-solving venture was a daring departure from conventional psychoanalytic thinking about the function and purpose of dreams. Even those who diverged from the traditional psychoanalytic focus on the Id and primary processes, with a refocusing on the Ego and secondary (reality-based) processes tended to consider dreams to be Id-driven and highly irrational.

The noted Ego psychologist, Ernst Kris (1953) introduced the concept of “regression in the services of the ego”—yet reserved this creative and problem-solving function for purposefully creative acts such as painting, caricature, and comedy. Kris considered dreams to be under the control of the Id and not engaged in any kind of purposeful manner. Yet, from the perspective offered by Fromm, dreams are often providing regressive services (such as the use of metaphor and fanciful narrative) that do serve the ego. Dreams can provide insight about interpersonal relationships. They can offer highly creative images that translate during waking hours to works of art, innovative products and the solving of complex problems.

In the Service of the Ego

Given this framing of dreams as regressive operations in the service of the ego, we can apply some of Kris’ insights regarding the artistic enterprise to the interpretation of dreams. First, as the name implies, regression in the service of the ego means that the Id is not in charge. While dreams might serve an important Id-driven expressive function, they need not be restricted to this function. Both Sarah’s and Dan’ dreams, for instance, might be expressing some of Sarah’s and Dan’s aggressive instincts, they also might be suggesting that this aggression is coming from outside these two dreamers. Sarah and Dan need not blame themselves (inwardly directed aggression) for their negative feelings. There is someone else in their life that is making them feel wounded and hurt—though they might also want to reflect on their own role in bringing about this aggression.

Similarly, a dream might be serving a Super-Ego-driven repressive function, yet also providing a pathway toward constructive action. Katherine’s dream, for instance, could serve as a warning against Katherine becoming too attached to her boyfriend or even (in classic Freudian fashion) too sexually active with her boyfriend. The shattered mobile is intended by Katherine’s super-ego to dissuade her from any intimate behavior.

However, even this repressive function may be engaged alongside an Ego-driven function: “let’s be careful about getting too involved with this boyfriend before you find out more about him.” The reality-based caution may enable Katherine to be thoughtful in her decisions about intimate involvement with someone rather than being irrational and “trigger happy” in throwing the x&&%#\$ out of her life after dropping her precious mobile.

Types of Regression

A second major point that Kris (and other Ego psychologists) have made concerns the term “regression.” In keeping with Freud’s conception of regression, the ego psychologists tend to consider this process to

involve one or more of three features: (1) focus on earlier experiences in one's life (regression to childhood), (2) returning to more primitive processes such as fantasy, ritual and personification of nonhuman objects (such as envisioning animals as humans or envisioning trees and rocks with soul), (3) engaging in behaviors that are "childish" or playful, and (4) judging what is "real" based on internal wishes and feelings rather than external verification.

We find this regression being artfully portrayed in Disney movies—such as when a cricket is singing about getting one's dreams fulfilled by wishing on a star. We also find it displayed in the plays, movies and T.V. series that find protagonists displaying death-defying acts of heroism and care—resulting always in a happy ending. Be it a James Bond movie, one of the Star Wars or Star Trek features, or the latest superhero flick, the regression is in full force and many of us lap up the projected images while nourishing ourselves with a bag of popcorn (as we did as children going to the movies).

Are we not also engaging in these forms of regression when dreaming? Can this regression serve an important ego-based function, while serving also (like the superhero movies) as escape and entertainment? I offered dreams in my second essay (Bergquist, 2023b) that seem to provide both escape and some teaching. At other times, the dreams seem to be regressive in a manner that does not provide escape but does provide insights. The dreams offered by Sarah, Dan and Katherine certainly can't be considered a source of joy and escape for them—they are "serious" and perhaps intended to alert and teach the dreamer (more like one of the documentaries we watch that concern our collapsing environment or violence in our streets).

We can consider the kind of regression found in our three dreams. In all three cases, the regression was primarily of the second type (primitive process). Actions were portrayed in all three dreams that were not based in reality (though the dropped mobile did become reality). All three dreams concerned present day challenges rather than issues from childhood (though all three dreams might ultimately relate back to childhood feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness). None of the protagonists took action in the three dreams I have presented.

Sarah could have offered some "primitive" action such as whacking her male colleague over the head. Dan might have done the same with his wife. There was no superhero to fly in and save Katherine's mobile from hitting the ground. Most importantly, these three dreams were not wish-fulfilling. Reality wasn't being distorted on behalf of some primitive wish on the part of Sarah, Dan or Katherine—unless we consider the damage done to be somehow what our three dreamers wanted bestowed on them (thus serving a punitive Super-Ego function).

Temporary and Ego-Controlled

A third important point made by Ernst Kris and his fellow Ego psychologists is that the regression is controlled by the Ego and is of temporary duration. While the Id and Super-ego can push for regression that lasts for a long time and is not controllable – as in the case of psychotic episodes—the Ego best serves its adaptive function by keeping the regression brief and purpose-driven.

The Ego psychologists tend to discount dreams as being controlled by the Ego precisely because they seem to emerge uninvited during the night. If we bring in Barrett's notion of the sleep committee, then we would propose that the dreams and their content have been invited on behalf of some overriding concern. Furthermore, the regression is temporary. The dream is a perfect representation of temporally-limited retreat from waking reality—perhaps on behalf of a deeper understanding of this reality.

This deeper reality can be found in the insights offered Sarah regarding her male colleague and the potential motivations of Dan's wife. Katherine is exposed to a "harsh" potential reality regarding her boyfriends that ends up becoming a "real" reality for her. These three dreams offer a poetic and/or dramatic glimpse into disturbing realities. While these realities might be burdensome if they are drawn out over a long period of time—much as is the case with a much-too-long play—they are short and to the point (or to several points) as portrayed in these three dreams. The dreamer can be alerted without being overwhelmed or beaten down. If the message isn't received by the dreamer, then the committee can offer the message again (and again) in slightly different form(s). The ego is being well served by the committee.

Stringencies

A final point of insight (and potential contention) concerns the matter of discipline—the existence of skills as well as inspiration in any purposefully regressive act. Kris (1953, p. 252-253) writes about "stringencies" (constraints) as critical to any creative act. There are boundaries that must be respected when engaging in any creative act. The materials being used provide some of these boundaries as does the purpose for which the creative act is engaged—including requirements or expectations of the audience for this creative act.

Dreams might be immediately dismissed because they lack these stringencies. Materials can be created without any regard for reality and purposes can readily be changed (or don't exist at all). Yet, we have seen the constraining conditions and purposeful planning of dreams in both the insightful analysis offered by Erich Fromm and that offered by Deirdre Barrett in her portrayal of the sleep committee.

For both Fromm and Barrett, it is not a matter of constraints, rather it is a matter of daytime constraints preventing the dreamer from seeing the reality of their relationship with other people or the reality of what exists in the potential expression of some artistic image or solution to some elusive problem. The constraints of daytime reality are replaced by the constraints of a nighttime portrayal that is both insightful and compelling. The dream is to be a well-told tale—this is the constraint placed on the dream by the committee.

Conclusions

Is there really a committee of sleep wandering around our psyche setting up agenda for our night of dreams and crafting dreams to teach us something? This sounds a bit too imaginative—a bit like envisioning a war going on in our psyche between the forces of the Id, Ego and Superego. Are some dreams actually purposeful—or are they acting like Rorschach ink blots on which we project our waking needs and aspirations.

Perhaps dreams are simply random neuronal firings to which we add our meaning-making proclivities. We see castles and mythic figures in the clouds that stand before us on a summer day. We might see richly textured metaphor and compelling dramas in our dreams during a summer night. If all of this is the case, then we should applaud our imaginative abilities when awake and recalling our dreams, rather than applauding our ability to create purposeful dreams while asleep.

Yet, it is hard to dismiss the potential messages conveyed in our dreams. Can't Sarah and Dan learn something given the scene they have observed (and created) in their dreams? Given that Katherine's

mobile was actually dropped, can't we conclude that her dream was something more than just a clustering of random cortical images that are set free during her sleep?

There is indeed much that is not known about dreams—about where they come from and what if anything they mean. However, there is one thing that we do know for certain. We know the author of our dreams. Fromm (1951, p. 4) puts it this way:

When we are asleep, we awake to another form of existence. We dream. We invent stories which never happened and sometimes for which there is not even any precedent in reality. Sometimes we are the hero, sometimes the villain; sometimes we see the most beautiful scenes and are happy; often we are thrown into extreme terror. But whatever the role we play in the dream *we* are the author, it is *our* dream, *we* have invented the plot.

Unlike during our waking hours when we are influenced by the environment in which we are living and working and must often abide by the dictates of other people who have power over us, the dream is exclusively our own personal domain. Given our ownership of the dream's contents—the poetic metaphors and dramatic episodes contained in the dream—it seems appropriate that we listen to what we are teaching ourselves. At the very least, we are honoring our own internal wisdom when we attend to our dreams. We are appreciating our own unique perspectives on reality. Isn't this an important act of attention to take after we have had an eventful night of sleep (and our committee has done its important work)?

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